Photo-composite by Patricia Eaton

Welcome to Naval Aviation

By Ltjg. Brandon Scott

I'd always heard the fleet stories from salty training-command instructors about how bad it can get flying around the ship, but I never believed it was much different from flying around the field. I always thought they were embellishing the stories to get us students to take training seriously. I can't tell you how many times during those instrument simulators that I heard the phrase, "Someday you are going to be behind the ship, at night, in a terrible storm, and will have to fly the best approach of your life to get aboard. There isn't going to be anyone with you to pimp you to do this or that."

I always thought, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I've flown in bad weather before; how much different can it be?"

So, there I was, a nugget in a Hornet squadron on my first at-sea period. It was the second week of COMPTUEX, and I still was getting familiar with flying around the ship. My flight that day was an ADEX (air-defense exercise) mission with the skipper. We still were in the presence phase of the exercise, and our mission was to intercept and to escort the bad guys. Before starting the mission, we were scheduled to receive gas from a KC-135 overhead the ship. Getting gas from a KC-135 is never much fun, and the skipper suggested I put my drop tanks in stop transfer before takeoff. Hornet drop tanks can take longer to fill than internal tanks. With the drop tanks in stop transfer, all the fuel would be sent to the internal tanks, meaning less time behind the tanker.

My takeoff was delayed for minor problems, and the skipper launched first. After launch, the skipper called me on our aux frequency to say the tanker wasn't on station. That was a big relief. I reached down and flipped the tank-transfer switch to normal transfer, as I headed to our cap station.

Just as I flipped the switch, all my displays blinked, and cautions started popping up. I had problems with fuel pressure and invalid fuel-tank quantities. These problems got my attention because we now were on an hour-and-a-half cycle with no tanker gas. Around the ship, as I was learning, you always are concerned about fuel, even in a double-bubble Hornet.

As I headed toward my cap station to join the skipper, I saw my fuel indicators were frozen. "Not too big a deal," I told myself, "I'll just tell the skipper what I have once we join. After all, we just launched, and I have plenty of gas." I checked my bit page and saw the

cause of the problems was a signal-data-computer (SDC) failure.

I was 15 miles away from joining when the skipper committed on the first bogey group. Well, the middle of an intercept is no time to talk on aux frequency, and I didn't feel the fuel cautions were a pressing issue, so I decided to keep quiet until the intercept was over. I finally joined on the skipper after chasing him through a few broken cloud layers, and we rendezvoused on the bogeys. We were hanging out behind the bogeys waiting for instructions, so I told the skipper what I had. Our controller told us to break off the escort, and he vectored us to get gas from an S-3. While fueling from the Viking, I mentioned to the skipper that I couldn't tell how much gas was received. He decided we should knock it off and head to the ship. The problem was my drop tanks still indicated full, and I had no way to know if they were transferring. The ship controller considered this info and decided it would be best to have me divert to Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico.

"Divert? Don't they know I'm a nugget? Oh well, so much for an easy flight," I thought. I dug the approach plates out of my nav bag. I eventually landed safely and wondered when I should go back to the ship.

After calling the ready room, I found out the squadron had sent another jet with a spare SDC. The plan was to replace the bad one and return to the ship that night. Upon arriving at Roosevelt Roads, the pilot who had flown in said the weather near the ship was getting bad, and flight operations were cancelled for the night. If we didn't get back soon, we would be spending the night on land.

The idea of spending the night in Puerto Rico didn't sound too bad to me, when compared to flying back to the ship at night in a thunderstorm, but the decision wasn't up to me. It didn't take long to change the SDC, and we were on our way.

We launched as singles, so we wouldn't have to fly in bad weather as a flight. As I flew off into the pitch-black night and got tossed around by some turbulence, I started to remember those stories from my training-command instructors.

Eventually, we contacted the ship, and they gave us a descent to 1,200 feet. That sounded great to me. We'd be on deck in a few minutes. When I was 30 miles away, I decided to dump down to max-trap fuel weight. I just had reached for the switch when I heard, "Ninety-nine, all aircraft max conserve. Hold overhead mother, max conserve!"

I thought, "What? I just came down out of that stuff, and I certainly don't want to go back into it and hold!" As we climbed back into the storm, we had moderate-to-severe turbulence with driving rain. Although both aircraft tried, it became apparent there wasn't a good place to hold around the ship. The rain was so loud I hardly could hear the radios and we saw lightning every few seconds.

After what seemed like an eternity, the ship finally cleared us for our approach. The other aircraft went first and was not able to call the ball until one-half mile. That didn't sound good, so I thought about flying "the best approach of my life."

When it came my turn, I chased line-up all the way, and I broke out well right. When I went low on the correction to centerline, the LSOs had enough, and I got the "Eat at Joe's" waveoff lights. "So much for the best approach of my life," I thought. My second approach was much better and I got aboard safely. I just was glad to be on deck and proudly walked across the flight deck in the pouring rain. When I got to the ready room, the skipper was standing there with his hand out. As I shook his hand, he said, "Welcome to naval aviation!"

As for lessons learned, I finally appreciated all those boring instrument simulators, which I dreaded so much in the training command. I also was glad I had looked over the diverts before needing them. A few days later, a door-3 fastener came loose and shot down my right intake, FODing the engine. I had to bring the jet back aboard single engine.

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In one week, during my first at-sea period, I had diverted to an unfamiliar airfield, made a single-engine landing at the ship, and had flown back aboard at night in one of those notorious thunderstorms you hear about in the training command. One piece of advice for those about to become nuggets: Don't relax because you finally made it to the fleet; the real test is about to begin!

Ltjg. Scott flies with VFA-86.